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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ADDIS ABABA 003188

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: RECONCILING THE OROMO LIBERATION FRONT AND
ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT

REF: A. ADDIS 3159
[1](#)B. ADDIS 2487

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) Recognizing that the outlawed Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) is widely supported -- at least in principle -- among Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, Embassy Addis Ababa has long held that reconciliation between the Ethiopian Government (GoE) and OLF is critical to the long-term political stability of Ethiopia. Holding a similar view, two separate groups of Ethiopian "elders" have worked in recent months to bring the OLF -- formerly a partner of the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) until the lack of power sharing by the EPRDF led it to advocate armed struggle against the GoE in 1992 -- back into the fold of legal political parties within Ethiopia. While the GoE's persistent harassment of legal Oromo opposition parties in Ethiopia and its recent crackdown on Oromos (Ref. A) has certainly not sent the necessary gesture of goodwill to the OLF in exile, the moderation of some OLF elders in the diaspora combined with the Prime Minister's approval of both "elders" processes suggest that there may be an emergent opening for reconciliation and a positive role the USG could play. End Summary.

THE DUELING ELDERS

[1](#)2. (SBU) Coming off of the success of brokering the pardon of the opposition leaders arrested in November 2005, Professor Ephraim Isaac and Pastor Daniel Gebreselassie (Elders 1), approached the Embassy to support their efforts to broker various reconciliation efforts, including the GoE and the OLF. While the Elders 1 group was critical in the opposition pardon, they, and Prof. Ephraim in particular, were often seen as partisan through the process, exerting significant pressure on the opposition leaders to admit their guilt while not press the GoE to stand down or temper its position against them. Since then, Prof. Ephraim (himself an Oromo) and his colleagues have unilaterally reached out to various OLF elders including former Chairman Leencho Lata and grandson of the last king of Jimma, Ababiya Abajobir, and Dima Negewo, around reconciling with the GoE. The Elders 1 group met these three in Amsterdam September 19-21 along with the Ethiopian Ambassador to the Netherlands. One week later, Ababiya returned to Ethiopia after years in exile. Prof. Ephraim informed Ambassador and Pol/Econ Chief on November 4

that Prime Minister Meles continues to support his group's efforts to reach out to the OLF, and suggested that Ababiya's unharassed return reflects only the first step in a looming wave of former OLF leaders' returns to Ethiopia.

¶3. (SBU) While the Elders 1 process was afoot, a second team of Oromo elders (Elders 2) approached the Embassy with a new proposal. Ambassador Berhanu Dinka, Head of the Mekane Yesus Church Rev. Itaffa Gobana, and Oxfam America Director Aberra Tola offered a new option (Ref. B). The Elders 2 group reported in late September that a group of Oromo community leaders from within Ethiopia approached the three, previously rather apolitical prominent Oromos soliciting that they attempt to reconcile the GoE and OLF. Amb. Dinka reported that based on approval by Prime Minister Meles for his team to approach the OLF, the Elders 2 succeeded in January 2008 in getting an initial written commitment (the Amsterdam Agreement) from OLF Chairman Dawud Ibsa that the OLF would "accept, in principle," the Ethiopian constitution. When taken to the Prime Minister in the spring, Meles expressed skepticism about the statement and requested that the Elders 2 reconfirm that the OLF Executive Committee agreed to it. Despite outreach to, and receiving the support of, a broad variety of prominent Oromos in the diaspora around this effort, OLF Executive Committee members based in Asmara rejected the statement.

¶4. (SBU) Amb. Dinka presented us with a proposal in late September that he claimed had been endorsed by prominent figures at the Oromo Studies Association meeting in July, the community leaders in Ethiopia who initially approached his

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group, and several key OLF-related individuals. The proposal was to convene a conference of major Oromo elders and community leaders in Ethiopia to produce a declaration insisting that the OLF pursue reconciliation with the GoE. Amb. Dinka argued that such a consensus declaration could persuade Asmara-based OLF hard-liners -- hardened either by principle or due to pressure exerted on them by Eritrean President Isaias not to engage the GoE -- either to agree to engage the GoE or risk losing the support of the in-country Oromo community.

¶5. (SBU) When queried on the duplication of "elders" activities with Prof. Ephraim's group, Ambassador Dinka argued that Prof. Ephraim had lost the confidence of the Oromos for his partisan interventions on the GoE's behalf in the opposition pardon effort. Additionally, as an Oromo elder himself and having had a brother killed by GoE forces for alleged ties to the OLF, Prof. Ephraim, Amb. Dinka argued, is particularly not a credible advocate among Oromos because he has never once advocated to the GoE for the pardon or release of the thousands of Oromos detained in Ethiopia. Amb. Dinka further dismissed Elders 1's reconciliation efforts with the OLF noting that OLF Chairman Dawud Ibsa himself had written a letter to Prof. Ephraim arguing that the OLF leadership would not engage with him. In response to our skepticism about the receptivity of the EPRDF's Oromo sub-party the Oromo People's Democratic Organization (OPDO), Amb. Dinka argued that he and his group had discussed the issue with OPDO leaders including Addis Mayor Kuma Demeksa, Trade Minister Girma Birru, and Oromiya Regional President Abadula. While admitting that Abadula was initially opposed to such outreach, he later came around, and Kuma and Girma both supported the initiative. Amb. Dinka speculated that the OPDO support may reflect a desire for the OPDO to gain credibility within Ethiopia and shed the public perception of the party as an Oromo puppet of the Tigrayan leadership. Bringing the OLF back to Ethiopia, and possibly pursuing a future alliance with the EPRDF could offer a chance to aspiring OPDO leaders to later join the OLF, gain legitimacy, and pursue higher office. While we were skeptical that much of an opening genuinely existed among either the OLF or the GoE, the proposed approach was novel, low cost, and offered a slight opportunity potentially to help stabilize Ethiopia's

increasingly fragile political climate. As such, the Ambassador confirmed with the Prime Minister the latter's support for this effort and we funded the conference.

CONVENING ETHIOPIA'S OROMOS

¶6. (SBU) On October 30 and 31, the Elders 2 convened ten apolitical elders and community leaders from Addis Ababa and each zone of Oromiya to discuss how to bring the OLF back into the fold of legal political parties in Ethiopia. In a November 1 declaration, the 160 elders "strongly demanded that the OLF leadership heed the genuine desire of the Oromo people and enter into negotiations with the GoE" on the basis of the Amsterdam Agreement. On November 3, 30 of the assembled elders met with Prime Minister Meles to report on the conference and express concerns about the recent crack-down on Oromos in Ethiopia. Meles reportedly informed the group that he has two roles which he must balance: 1) maintaining law and order in the face of credible threats, and 2) promoting political reconciliation. As such, Meles affirmed that the GoE would continue to crack-down on anyone overtly supporting the OLF through actions, but would otherwise press for leniency toward those who simply support the OLF politically or in principle.

¶7. (SBU) On November 14, Amb. Dinka and his two colleagues briefed the press on their conference and the details of the Oromo leaders' declaration. On November 15, the OLF Executive Committee issued a press release noting that it had previously informed the Elders that it would not sign on to the Amsterdam Agreement as the OLF retains its position that "the OLF is committed to dialogue without precondition in the presence of a third party." Despite this statement, the Elders 2 group is not surprised by, and plans to reach out to the Asmara-based OLF leadership directly to assess whether the statement accurately reflects the OLF's actual position, or more the position that they must take while living in Asmara under the influence and pressure of Isaias.

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IS THE GOE RECEPTIVE?

¶8. (SBU) As reported in Ref. A, the Elders 2 conference of Oromo leaders coincided with a significant crack-down on Oromos in Ethiopia, re-igniting the question of the GoE's sincerity in reconciling with the OLF. Fundamentally, both Prof. Ephraim and Amb. Dinka have acknowledged to us in the past few months that the GoE is not willing to change its own tactics domestically with regard to the Oromo community or legal Oromo political parties in Ethiopia as a confidence building gesture. Instead, both elders have argued, the GoE expects the OLF to unilaterally abandon its professed strategy of armed struggle without any prior indications of the GoE's willingness to reconcile beyond the word of the Prime Minister passed through intermediaries.

¶9. (C) In response to our inquiries, Amb. Dinka speculated that the recent GoE crack-down on Oromos results from a resurgence of concern from the OPDO that the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) at the core of the EPRDF may abandon the OPDO for the OLF as it's Oromo partner should the OLF return to the domestic political scene. Despite this crack-down, both Prof. Ephraim and Amb. Dinka emphasized that they believe that the Prime Minister's receptivity to reconciliation with the OLF remains intact, and that he may be placating the OPDO, and hard-liners within the TPLF, with the current crack-down to cover his own strategy of returning the OLF to Ethiopian politics.

FINAL COMMENT AND NOTE

¶10. (C) The GoE's harassment, arrests, and crack-down on

Oromos and Oromo political parties, sends a clear message, in our assessment, that the GoE is not sincerely committed to meeting the OLF even part way in breaching the GoE-OLF divide. Just as the GoE's unrelenting assault on the domestic Oromo community impedes reconciliation, so to does the OLF's unwillingness to accept, even in principle, the Ethiopian constitution as a basic precondition to talks. The Elders 2 initiative provided a novel approach and a narrow window of opportunity, which we recognized before deciding to support their proposed conference. Despite the minuscule chance of the conference producing a break-through, having a consensus document endorsed by prominent elders and community leaders from throughout Oromiya calling on the OLF to pursue reconciliation with the GoE is a useful step.

111. (C) Embassy Addis Ababa fundamentally believes that GoE reconciliation with the OLF is critical to Ethiopia's long-term stability. If the USG chooses to support or facilitate GoE-OLF reconciliation -- as we did from 2004 to 2006 -- we must be prepared to exert pressure on both parties to offer confidence building gestures toward the other including a GoE pardon of alleged OLF prisoners and easing in the harassment of Oromos in Ethiopia as well as a unilateral declaration by the OLF to cease, at least temporarily, its commitment to armed struggle. Should the USG seek to pursue such efforts, it may be useful for AF and/or INR/AA to reach out to OLF leaders in the U.S. and Europe, as well as for Embassy Asmara to reach out to OLF Chairman Dawud Ibsa and members of the OLF Executive Committee separately, to explore the relative merits of the two "elders" initiatives, perceptions on the opening for reconciliation, and press for a commitment to re-attempt reconciliation. With the Elders 2 declaration, the Oromo people in Ethiopia have clearly stated that they are no longer looking for conflict, but for a peaceful approach to reverse Oromo marginalization. If the OLF can show themselves to be politicians and statesmen, the world would certainly be more sympathetic to their cause.
End Comment.
YAMAMOTO